

Charter schools

Charter schools are public schools operated independently of public school systems, either by nonprofit or for-profit organizations. Although they are largely publicly funded, charter schools are exempt from many of the requirements imposed by state and local boards of education regarding hiring and curriculum. As public schools, charter schools cannot charge tuition or impose special entrance requirements; students are usually admitted through a lottery process if demand exceeds the number of spaces available in a school. Charter schools generally receive a percentage of the per-pupil funds from the state and local school districts for operational costs based on enrollment. In most states, charter schools do not receive funds for facilities or start-up costs; therefore, they must rely to some extent on private donations. The federal government also provides revenues through special grants.

HIGHLIGHTS

- As of June 2016, 43 states and the District of Columbia had enacted legislation authorizing the creation of charter schools. Seven states had not.
- According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a charter school advocacy group, there were an estimated 6,824 total charter schools in the United States in the 2015-2016 school year. These schools enrolled approximately 2,930,600 students.
- Overall, charter school students accounted for 5.85 percent of total public school enrollment in the United States in 2015.



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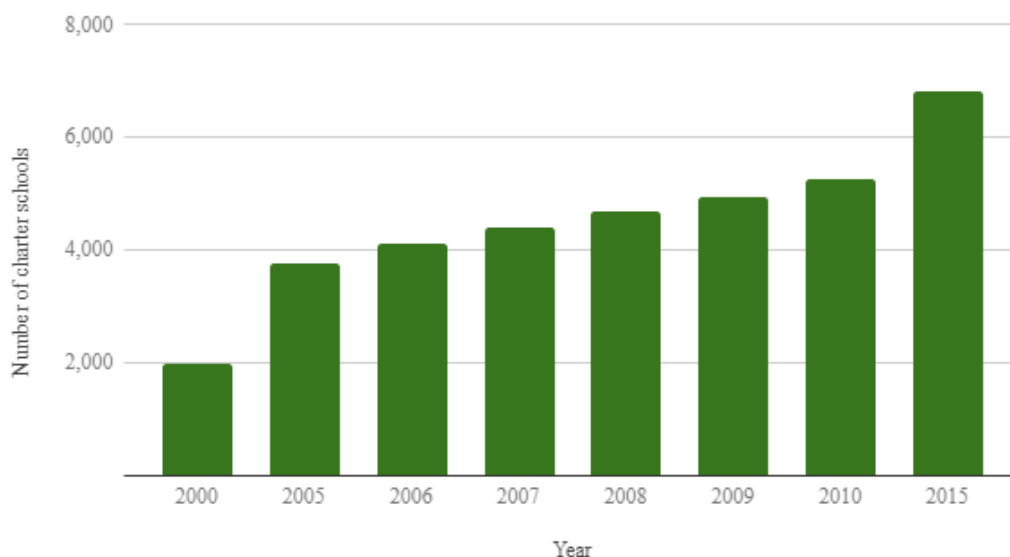
Charter school prevalence and enrollment

Charter school growth

See also: Charter school demographics and Charter school statistics for all 50 states

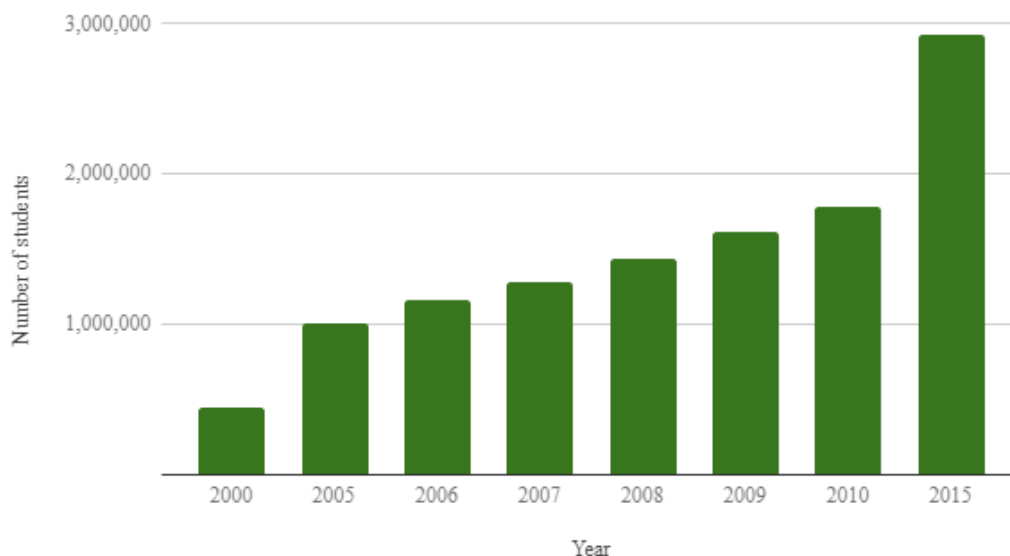
The prevalence of charter schools has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2000, there were 1,993 charter schools in the United States. In 2015, there were an estimated 6,824 charter schools nationwide. This represented a 242.4 percent increase. See the chart below for further details.^{[1][2]}

Charter school growth in number of schools



Similarly, charter school enrollments have been on the rise. In 2000, charter schools enrolled 448,343 students in the United States. In 2015, charter schools enrolled an estimated 2.9 million students. This represented a 553.7 percent increase. See the chart below for further details.^{[1][2]}

Charter school growth in enrollment



Charter school participation as a percentage of public school enrollment

The map below shows the percentages of charter school participation in each state, with dark green indicating the higher and light green the lower percentages of charter school enrollment. Those states without charter school laws are shown in gray.

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Background

History

Charter schools were first conceived as a response to failing traditional public schools, as part of the school choice reform movement. This movement sought to offer parents more choice and schools more freedom to innovate to meet students' needs, in exchange for greater accountability. Charter schools often serve high-risk students by implementing special programs tailored to their particular student populations. The concept of "charter" schools was first proposed in the 1970s by New England educator Ray Budde, who suggested that groups of teachers be given contracts or "charters" by their local school boards to explore new approaches. In the late 1980s, the idea attracted a small group of educators and policymakers, who together developed the charter school model. Minnesota became the first state to pass a charter school law in 1991; the state opened its first charter school in 1992.^[3]

In exchange for greater flexibility and exemption from many district and state regulations, charter schools have performance-based accountability standards. Charter schools can be set up by parents, community leaders, social entrepreneurs, businesses, teachers, school districts, or municipalities. Charter schools are typically reviewed every three to five years, and if they do not demonstrate performance in academic achievement, fiscal management, and organizational stability, a charter can be revoked and the school closed. Between 1992 and 2014, 1,036 charter schools closed, or 15 percent of the approximately 6,700 charter schools that opened in the United States during that time.^[4]

Charter school laws differ from state to state, and the ways in which those laws are written and implemented greatly impact charter schools' success. For a comparison of state charter school laws see this article^[5]



The Minnesota State Legislature approved the nation's first charter school law in 1992.

Studies

National Assessment Governing Board

In December 2012, the National Assessment Governing Board published an analysis comparing enrollment and student performance in charter schools and traditional public schools. Analyzing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the report's authors found "a consistent pattern of higher average NAEP scores for regular public schools than for charters when we look at the nation as a whole." However, the authors noted that in large cities "student achievement is roughly even overall [between charter schools and traditional public schools], but the black and Hispanic subgroups show higher scores in charter schools."^[6]

The following table summarizes key findings from this analysis. The full report can be accessed here ^[6]

National NAEP achievement in charter and regular public schools						
Grade	National 2003 (grade 4) or 2005 average		National 2011		Change between 2003 or 2005 and 2011	
	Charter average score	Regular public average score	Charter average score	Regular public average score	Charter school average change	Regular public average change
Grade 4; reading	212	217	218	220	6	3
Grade 8; reading	255	260	261	264	6	4
Grade 4; math	228	234	237	240	9	6
Grade 8; math	268	278	281	283	13	5

Source: National Assessment Governing Board, "Who Attends Charter Schools and How Are Those Students Doing?" December 2012

National Charter School Study

The National Charter School Study, released in June 2013 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), provided another view of charter school performance in the United States. In the aggregate, both reading and math results in charter schools showed improvement. The analysis, which included 27 states, showed that charter schools had advanced the reading learning gains of their students more than traditional public schools. There was also an improvement in the academic growth of charter students in math since 2009, to the extent that learning gains were similar to those of students in traditional public schools. The CREDO report found that charter students performed somewhat better in reading and about the same in math as their district counterparts. CREDO attributed this shift both to improvement in existing charter schools, and to the fact that the poorest-performing charters were being systematically closed.

Below are some key findings from the report:^[7]

1. At the time of this study's publication, the average charter school student gained an additional eight days of learning each year in reading, compared to the loss of seven days reported in 2009.

Center for Research on Education Outcomes



Basic facts

Location: Stanford, California

Top official: Margaret Raymond

Year founded: 1999

Website: Official website

2. In math, charter students in 2009 posted 22 fewer days of learning; by the time this study was published, that gap had closed.
3. Learning gains in reading were more positive than in any earlier period studied and significantly better than the gains posted in traditional public schools.
4. Average math learning in charter schools was no different on average than learning in traditional public schools.

Reaction

Support

Support for charter schools has risen steadily for several reasons, which include the following: higher standards for teachers and students, more personalized attention, a safer environment, more communication between teachers and parents, and greater accountability. In a poll by the Center for Education Reform, in which only 20 percent of respondents correctly identified charter schools as public schools, 78 percent of respondents said they supported “allowing communities to create new public schools — called charter schools — that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money.” In addition, supporters cite a “ripple effect” from charters schools that leads to improvement in the traditional public schools, which must compete to keep their students.^[8]

In 2010, the documentary *Waiting for “Superman”* (Guggenheim, 2010) told the story of five children whose parents try to get them into local charter schools, bringing attention to the steep increase in demand for charter schools as an alternative to failing public schools. Two reformers featured in the film were Geoffrey Canada, the CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone, and Michelle Rhee, a former chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public school system. The film “undertakes an exhaustive review of public education, surveying ‘drop-out factories’ and ‘academic sinkholes,’ methodically dissecting the system and its seemingly intractable problems” and “offers hope by exploring innovative approaches taken by education reformers and charter schools.”^[9]



Obama greets students from *Waiting for “Superman.”*

Charter schools have become politically popular, not only because they promise greater accountability and higher academic results for their often high-risk student populations, but also because charter schools cost less per pupil, saving taxpayer dollars. Funding varies by state and depends on many factors. In 2010-2011, on average, charter schools were funded at 61 percent of their district counterparts, averaging \$6,585 per pupil compared to \$10,771 per pupil at conventional district public schools. An April 2014 study called “Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands,” by the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, tracked all the revenues committed to public charter and traditional public schools from every source, public and private, and found a funding gap of 28.4 percent. This means that the average public charter school student in the United States received \$3,814 less in funding than the average traditional public school student.^{[10][11]}

Criticism

Despite the popularity and rapid growth of the charter school movement, critics that charter schools have not been proven to produce significantly higher levels of academic achievement as promised. In the aforementioned 2013 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, researchers investigated the effect of charter schools on student performance and concluded that the growth or improvement of individual students within every student subgroup ranged from “outstanding to dismal.” Their study showed how performance differed among economic and ethnic groups, with poor, black, and Hispanic students making the biggest gains in achievement in comparison to their traditional school counterparts. Asian and white students in charter schools did no better, and sometimes slightly worse than their counterparts in traditional public schools.^{[12][13]}

Critics also contend that charter schools divert funds from traditional public schools, which continue to enroll significant majorities of public school students, thereby compounding problems at failing schools and generating unequal outcomes for students.

Although the first charter school resulted from reforms supported by the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Albert Shankar, teacher unions do not unequivocally support charter schools. Some teacher unions tend to see charter schools as competition and a threat to the funding of traditional public schools. In addition, teacher unions do not generally support teacher merit pay and the collective bargaining prohibition provisions, which are common in charters. More recently, union leaders have complained that there is a lack of transparency, accountability, and quality for some of the large companies operating for-profit charter schools, and they demanded more oversight. In New York City in 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio (D) tried to reduce the growth of charter schools and return funding to traditional public schools in a pushback against the reform movement.^{[14][15][16]}

See also

Select a state from the map below to learn more about charter school policy.

- Election policy in the United States
- School choice on the ballot
- School choice
- Charter schools in the United States
- U.S. Department of Education

External links

- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- National Charter School Resource Center
- The Center for Education Reform



Footnotes

1. *National Center for Education Statistics*, "Number and enrollment of public elementary and secondary

schools, by school level, type, and charter and magnet status: Selected years, 1990-91 through 2010-11," accessed June 24, 2016

2. *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*, "A Closer Look at the Charter School Movement," accessed June 24, 2016

3. *Public School Review*, "What is a Charter School?" accessed May 14, 2014

4. ~~Center for Education Reform~~, "Choice and charter school: Facts" accessed October 20, 2014

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